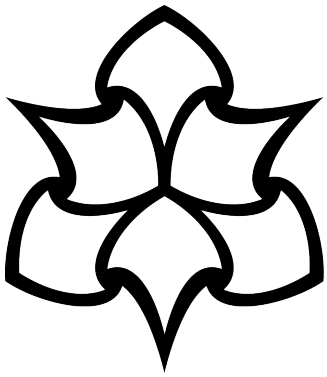

1974: 'Crisis in Architecture' and the Last Gasp of Municipal Modernism

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ABSTRACT

In 1974, as the Royal Institute of British Architects published Malcolm MacEwen's 'Crisis in Architecture', the makeup of local government in Britain was subject to massive upheaval as the Local Government Act came into force. MacEwen's 'Crisis' was predicated on the scarcity of resources, most vividly energy, in the ongoing oil crisis and ensuing Three-Day Week. He was also concerned with the inequity of wealth extraction by private developers and the gulf between architects and end users, especially in city centre commercial buildings. Amongst this maelstrom of shifting power, perceptions of administrative failure to control development, militant unionism, high inflation and environmental awakening, a flurry of last gasp architectural gestures were made. Between 1970 and 1974, certain urban boroughs, in the knowledge that they were to be subsumed by boundary realignments and cede their councils to those of larger metropolitan districts, commissioned new community buildings. In the north of Manchester, Radcliffe was to become part of Bury, but only after the conjunction of Bury and Rochdale (dubbed 'Botchdale' by local MP Michael Fidler) was dismissed. Radcliffe Town Council commissioned architectural firm Cruickshank & Seward to design a new civic centre which was opened in an expressly symbolic statement by Labour Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, on 30 March 1974 - two days before the Act became law. In this paper I will explore these last gasps of municipal modernism and argue for them as beacons of localism and symbols of a diminishing welfare state. I will ask how we should now consider the significance of such commissions collectively and whether they should be conceived as material cursors - early warning signs - on a path to neo-liberalism and the raft of crises foreseen by MacEwen in his treatise.

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This paper was predicated on a title – that of Malcolm MacEwen's *Crisis in Architecture*, published in 1974. My first intent was to celebrate the 'last gasp', referred to in my title, and I will do a little of that. However, In assembling the work, I established a reframing and that, in fact, the last gasp was just that – a drawing in of breath never to be released as Official Architecture and Planning changed for good. In that sense, this paper addresses periodisation. It is also a paper about the qualitative impact of political reform that alters spatio-governmental norms. Here, I will use examples from the north-west of England, but the same forces were simultaneously disruptive and productive in the creation of all of the metropolitan counties of the UK, also in 1974. In order to explore the impact of this particular crisis, I will use a nested series of political scales, focusing upon the historic county of Lancashire, the then newly formed Metropolitan County of Greater Manchester, the Metropolitan Borough of Bury and the urban district of Radcliffe.

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My work, for a long time, has focussed on the machinations of planners and architects in local government during the post-war period. Such a focus, on the built environment and on local government, inevitably encounters the early 1970s as a time of considerable disruption. MacEwen's 'Crisis' was predicated on the scarcity of resources, most vividly energy, in the ongoing oil crisis and ensuing Three-Day Week. He was also concerned with the inequity of wealth extraction by private developers and the gulf between architects and end users. Amongst this maelstrom of shifting power, perceptions of administrative failure to control development, militant unionism, high inflation and environmental awakening, was also the massive structural upheaval brought about by the Local Government Act 1972, that came into force on 1st April 1974. Presaged by a series of reports that pointed towards increasingly managerial structures, the profession of architecture within local government would never be quite the same after this date. Thus, my 'post-war' is almost always concluded in 1974.

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In architectural culture more generally change was afoot. It was the year that the visionary collective power that was Archigram split up, and arguably, as a new appreciation of the vernacular took hold, was also the arrival of post-modernism. Architecture critic Charles Jencks famously asserted that the death of modernism was at 3.32pm in St Louis, Missouri, on 15 July 1972 when the Pruitt Igoe housing scheme was unceremoniously blown up with dynamite – no-one has been quite so precise about the birth of post-modernism… Nonetheless, in a less dramatic sense, the governmental structures that had prevailed and delivered vast amounts of state sponsored construction in the UK were also exploded and here I would like to consider why this happened and what were its effects.

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To many observers, on both sides of the political spectrum, local government reform was necessary. In the north-west of England, the journalist Derek Senior made impassioned and informed calls for city regions as administrative units of government. Senior was educated at Manchester Grammar School and Balliol College, Oxford. He began his career at the then *Manchester Guardian* in 1937 and developed specialism in matters of planning that enabled his editorial role in the comprehensive 1945 Plan for Manchester. In 1956, such was his expertise, he was made an Honorary Associate Member of the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI). Senior made public calls for the creation of a new county authority centred upon Manchester in 1960. He believed that the dreams and ambitions of the 1945 Plan called for such and that without it, the city would struggle to realise the comprehensive development as it was proposed.[1] Leslie Green's book, *Provincial*

[1] The Manchester Guardian, June 15th 1960, p.18 'New heart for Manchester'.

Metropolis, had established what Senior considered an irrefutable argument for the creation of a city region authority which he believed was necessary to spatially govern the urban agglomerations of the conurbations.[2] The Redcliffe-Maud Commission set up in 1964, reported its findings on local government restructure in 1969. The unitary model, proposed in its findings, appeared to favour Labour voters' demographic, insofar as it looked like an extension of the county borough system where Labour was politically strong. The Local Government Act of 1972, instituted by Edward Heath's Conservative administration, was said to bear 'little resemblance to the proposals of the Royal Commission' and viewed by some commentators as seriously damaging to urban government.[3] In short, the 1972 Act stressed, 'decentralised decision-making … and a system of administrative competition similar to the classical market economy',[4] turning many chief officers into managers.

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In many senses, the new focus on managerial processes above professionalism pre-empted what was to arrive more generally in architecture. MacEwen's most insightful observations concerned finance and the impact it would have on the entire construction sector, not least of all architecture. Clearly, this in turn has altered the physical fabric of cities in innumerable ways. Commenting on the prevailing idea of professionalism before 1974, management scholar, Richard Kerley, observed that, 'The architect wanted to be county architect; the librarian to be city librarian; the educational official to be chief education officer … Such a focus on the professional roots and background of the most senior posts was highly significant, both for the management of the organisation and the careers of the managers within it.'[5] As the prospective reordering came into view, the planning and architectural press began to speculate on the outcomes. Considering the shift to increasing managerialism, a correspondent in *Built Environment* (renamed from *Official Architecture and Planning* in 1972), the primary journal reflecting views of public sector architects, planners and surveyors, considered that 'professions could lose out unless they are willing to embrace new disciplines, such as cost benefit and management accountancy, and adopt more flexible attitudes in their areas of interest.'[6] Derek Senior's normally emphatic prose was tempered to that of optimism as he stressed that, '[o]ne must hope that architects will be regarded as experts in the field of local authority.'[7] Whilst he advocated for local government reform that would reconcile administrative units with the planning task he considered vital to regional cities, he did not necessarily observe the inherent dichotomy between

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[2] Green, L.P. (1959) Provincial metropolis: the future of local government in South-East Lancashire ; a study in metropolitan analysis (London : Allen & Unwin).

[3] Jones, G.W., 'The Local Government Act 1972 and the Redcliffe-Maud Commission', The Political Quarterly, Vol. 44, No. 2, April 1973, pp.154-66.

[4] Jones, G.W., 'The Local Government Act 1972 and the Redcliffe-Maud Commission', The Political Quarterly, Vol. 44, No. 2, April 1973, pp.154-66.

[5] Kerley, R. (1994) Managing Services. In Managing in Local Government (London: Palgrave) pp.48-67.

[6] 'Local government reorganisation', Built Environment, June 1972, p.163.

[7] Derek Senior, 'Local Government Reform: the outlook for the built environment', RIBA Journal, April 1971, p.154.

managerialism and professionalism and the potential impact of contracting on quality in the built environment.

The Bains Committee Report followed the decision to restructure local government and focussed on matters of internal reorganisation. Ironically, despite its own form as a committee, it asserted that the proliferation of local authority committees should be ended.[8] Its contents may be characterised by the following: '…the traditional departmental attitude within local government must give way to a wide ranging corporate outlook.'[9] For metropolitan counties, the report stated 'We have not included an architect or an estates officer within our suggested structure, but in some counties such appointments may be desirable. We envisage, however, that in many instances the districts will provide the requisite services for the county, or that they will be obtained from private sources.' Similarly, the report did not include architectural services as a necessary part of non-metropolitan districts.[10] The impact of such decision making would significantly affect municipal architectural services and was reflective of changes more generally in construction, and those that would come to bear on an increasingly capitally driven approach to development. That these changes took place in local government, and were set in motion during the late 1960s, challenges some of the prevailing narratives around neo-liberalism and the sharp right turn of the Thatcher government, instead asserting what political scientist Robert Ledger has referred to as a 'transition'.[11] The impact on the municipal architect was initially foreseen by its own representative journal, but the wider architectural press soon caught on to the potential implications, which were manifold.

Primarily, municipal architectural services were being orientated towards management accountancy and cost benefit analysis, skills that were not always central to the profession. Moreover, the scale of operations for many newly formed districts would shift dramatically upwards and it was thought that, '[a] district council, even in a large town, where housing was virtually the only area of any significant development would almost certainly find great difficulty in recruiting architectural staff of design ability and managerial capacity.'[12] Casting management and architectural quality as binary opposites, Jack Whittle, the County Architect of Cheshire considered that '…if you are a dedicated professional you will be given less opportunity for senior office than one who will subordinate his professional interests to management priorities.'[13] Contrastingly, the Association of Official Architects saw that '[t]he obvious remedy' was 'to maintain a very high standard of managerial

[8] Singh, U.B. (2009) Decentralized Democratic Governance in New Millennium: Local Government in the USA, UK, France, Japan, Russia and India (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company) p.76.
[9] The Bains Report, The New Local Authorities, Management and Structure, 1972.
[10] Built Environment, Vol. 1, No. 6, September 1972, p. 410
[11] Ledger, R. (2018) Neoliberal Thought and Thatcherism. 'A Transition From Here to There?' (London: Routledge).
[12] 'Architects and reorganisation', Built Environment, September 1972, p.410.
[13] Jack Whittle, Cheshire County Architect, Architects' Journal, 2 May 1973, p.1031.

competency to demonstrate irrefutably that architects do not lack practical ability, even if they also happen to be artists'.[14] This speaks to the long founded and continuing aspersion that architects, in the pursuit of aesthetic quality, compromise effectiveness and efficiency in construction. Such a view prevails, particularly during economic downturns, also recognised by Whittle who, in the same article, surmised that, 'the reaction to the mention of quality in a period when the emphasis is on growth, productivity and effectiveness is that it is visionary, idealistic or a prelude to asking for money to spend.'[15] Of course, neither view truly captures the spectrum of services and the aptitudes of individual architects in their delivery, but it was fair to say that, '[t]he built environment professions could lose out unless they are willing to embrace new disciplines, such as cost benefit and management accountancy, and adopt more flexible attitudes in their areas of interest.'[16]

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Whilst district councils were generally expanded under the Local Government Act, certain county councils shrank. Perhaps most significantly affected was Lancashire where, until the structural upheaval consequent on Act, the county incorporated not only Manchester and Liverpool, which took full responsibility for their own municipal works, but also many smaller county boroughs who did not, as well as all the smaller towns and villages in an area that stretched from the Mersey to Furness. As reorganisation ensued, Lancashire County Council was involved with five new counties and ten metropolitan districts and was said to 'be transferring staff in a number of different directions'.[17] Such transfers were also wrought on the staff of former county boroughs, such as the City of Manchester, which, by way of the Act, became a metropolitan district of the new metropolitan county of Greater Manchester. The first Chief Planning Officer of Manchester, John Millar, who directed a team in the replanning of vast swathes of the city from 1963 onwards, became County Planning Officer, taking some of his deputies with him. In the planning sphere, this governmental shake up aligned with a motion towards more regional and economic planning at the expense of much of the physical planning that preceded it. Town planning was a relatively young discipline and a significant proportion of planning professionals working in the post-war period had undergraduate degrees in architecture. Thus, the act of planning was frequently accompanied by quite detailed urban design that took account of the aesthetic qualities of space alongside more complex matters of zoning and infrastructure. The transition from micro to macro concerns are captured in a series of reports published in Manchester between 1964 and 1979, which moved steadily from illustrating the detailed planning of the central area between 1964 and 1966, to agendas of city wide urban renewal in 1967, to considerations of the city's sub-

[14] 'Architecure with management', Built Environment, October 1972, p.489.
[15] Jack Whittle, Cheshire County Architect, Architects' Journal, 2 May 1973, p.1031.
[16] 'Local government reorganisation', Built Environment, June 1972, p.163.
[17] Norton, A.L., 'Local Government Reorganisation. When the bill becomes law', RIBA Journal, July 1972, pp.291-296.

regional context by 1972 and onwards to the county structure plan of 1979. Such analysis and reporting reflected not only changes to local government structures, but was also bound with a rise in regional thinking attributable to the European project - the legislation of the 1972 Local Government Act had to be steered through Parliament as Britain lined up for its entry to the European Economic Community in 1973.

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The slow progress of the Local Government Act was reported in the Guardian in January 1972, the committee was said to have 'spent hours considering the displeasure of Lancashire, where one Conservative MP described the new unit to be created out of Bury and Rochdale as "Botchdale".[18] Said MP, Michael Fidler, represented the parliamentary constituency of Bury and Radcliffe, yet each of these towns also had their own independent borough council and local seats of government in their respective town hall buildings. Radcliffe was subsumed by an enlarged Bury Metropolitan Borough in 1974 and to this day is perceived by some as 'the forgotten town', that has lost its assets, including its leisure centre and civic hall, which have not been replaced.[19] The civic hall was undoubtedly Radcliffe's last municipal gasp and, without a borough architect's department, was a commissioned scheme undertaken by John Sheard acting for the well regarded Manchester firm, Cruickshank & Seward. The local press reported it as a building of 'distinctive character' that was 'planned to commemorate the conclusion of an era before the town became absorbed into the Metropolitan Borough of Bury'. Although, the provision of a new hall was mooted by the council (the members of which John Sheard recalls as, 'a fish and chip shop owner, a railway porter, a postman, a garage mechanic and a wholesale jeweller … all 'worthy burghers' of the borough') in 1965.[20] The council reportedly wanted to 'go out with a bang', 'had reserved about £250,000 in the kitty' and 'were not prepared to donate [it] to Bury'.[21] The manner of the commission reflected the nature of personal associations between local politicians and those who served them.

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Sheard was known to the 'very go-ahead' Borough Surveyor, John Nuttall, due to his earlier work in the design of two housing estates whilst working for the practice of Wilson Womersley.[22] The second of the two was on a site close to St. Thomas's Church in the town, not far from the proposed site for the new Civic Hall.

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[18] McKie, D., 'Creeping Slowly to Europe', The Guardian, 17 January 1972, p.6

[19] Timan, J., 'Greater Manchester's 'forgotten town' demands chance to make its own decisions', Manchester Evening News, 28 January 2020.

[20] Letter from John Sheard to Mr Hodges, 8 February 2011. Part of correspondence related to the listing application for the civic hall. Held at Bury Musuem and Archives.

[21] Letter from John Sheard to Mr Hodges, 8 February 2011. Part of correspondence related to the listing application for the civic hall. Held at Bury Musuem and Archives.

[22] Letter from John Sheard to Mr Hodges, 8 February 2011. Part of correspondence related to the listing application for the civic hall. Held at Bury Musuem and Archives.

The layout of each was based on pedestrian access to dwellings, with communal and play space prioritised over car parking. Traditional methods of construction, by local firm Connor and Molyneux, put emphasis on the use of maintenance free materials.

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Such an approach was prescient of the general demise of brutalist concerns in architecture and further embodied in John Sheard's design for the Civic Hall. The 'gentle' and 'caring' forms and handmade soft brown Butterley bricks were 'a bit of a reaction … to the brutalist era'.[23]

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Reactionary too, was the timing of the building's opening – March 30th 1974, two days before the Local Government Act came into force. The guest of honour was Prime Minister Harold Wilson who had formed a minority government earlier in the same month. Between 1970 and 1974, the Conservative administration dismantled the processes of local government reform, that Wilson had set in motion, as recommended by the Redcliffe-Maud committee. Wilson's opening of the Civic Hall, itself a public gesture of defiance, may be read as registering his personal disapproval of the legislative shifts enacted by Edward Heath's single term administration – he must have had more pressing matters as PM than to open this small hall in a provincial northern town. His public view in his address to the citizens of Radcliffe was thus, '[t]he present changes are somewhat different from those my colleagues and I would have wished, but we do not propose to further refashion local government and inject a new period of uncertainty.'[24]

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Both Heath and Wilson were beset by economic troubles related to the embargoed supply of oil in 1973, - one of MacEwen's many crises. In Lancashire, this also impacted on the development of a highly innovative plastic construction system. Up to 1974, Lancashire had the largest Architect's Department, and largest building programme, outside of London. Over 100 architects were supported in their work by research and development and furniture design groups.[25] The R&D group had evolved new timber and concrete building methods for schools, so it is no surprise that a school should become the testing ground for a new plastic construction system. The department aimed to build an entire school from its plastic system at a site in Thornton-Cleveleys but, before they did, a prototype single classroom was constructed as an addition to a Victorian primary school building on

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[23] Interview with John Sheard, 5 August 2011, Torquay.

[24] Radcliffe Times, 4 April 1974, p.13.

[25]. Geraint Franklin, Elain Harwood, Simon Taylor and Matthew Whitfield, England's Schools 1962-88, a Thematic Study, English Heritage Research Report Series, no.33, 2012, http://research.historicengland.org.uk/Report.aspx?i=15107, accessed 20 May 2015; Reports of the County Architect 1948-1973.

Kennington Road in Fulwood, north of Preston, resulting from the school's need for space and the department's need to test the system. Architects Ben Stephenson and Mike Bracewell developed the material technology,[26] which was tested to destruction and was demonstrated to 'more than meet the requirements of the Fire Regulations', becoming the first all-plastic building in the country to perform thus.[27] According to reports, the children and staff were 'very pleased with it' as it allowed freedom of movement, was warm and had good acoustics.[28] The advanced nature of the system was mirrored in the three-dimensional computer-aided design software used in its development. The classroom was completed in November 1974 but the oil crisis put paid to any further development or the realisation of an entirely plastic school.[29]

It is clear to me that the fissures created by the raft of crises wrought upon county, city and borough architecture and planning departments were never closed or repaired. In a barbed article, in the journal *Building,* entitled 'The Great Job Carve Up', lecturer in local government, Tony Eddison, wrote that, 'it's almost impossible to find any one officer or member, who has a good word to say about the changes, I.E. in comparison with what could have happened'.[30] That said, the shake-up was concomitant with all of the other crises of the day and the general motion towards neo-liberalism that impacted on the whole construction sector. In a gently political manner, uncharacteristic of a chief officer, Lancashire County Architect, Roger Booth, used the foreword to his 1975-77 Report to lay out the damage done to the profession stating that, 'almost one-quarter of the Construction Industry [is] now unemployed and, according to a recent official statement from the RIBA, a proportion of over one in every three Architects, if not actually unemployed, then not employed in Architecture. It is too early to say whether the nadir has yet been reached, although it is not too early to say that the public sector portion of National construction (about one-half of it) has taken the biggest blow and, with it of course, all Public Architect's Departments – County, City or District.'[31] The examples used here to illustrate the material effects of governmental restructuring point to the magnitude and the interconnectedness of the post-war state. The merits, or otherwise, of state control versus free market economies continue to play out along traditional political binaries. What may be observed here, is that, amidst manifold crises, municipal planning and architecture collapsed in 1974 and never really recovered.

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Or did it…?

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[26]. 'In the Round', The Guardian, 26 November 1974, p.21.

[27]. County Architect's Report, April 1974 to March 1975, Lancashire County Council, p.91, LCC/10/1/1, Lancashire County Record Office.

[28]. 'In the Round', The Guardian, 26 November 1974, p.21.

[29]. County Architect's Report, April 1974 to March 1975, Lancashire County Council, p.116, LCC/10/1/1, Lancashire County Record Office.

[30] Tony Eddison, 'The great job carve up', Building, 25 Jan 1974, p.82.

[31] Roger Booth, Foreword, Report of the County Architect, 1975-77.

This is Hertsmere Civic Centre, drawn in 1974 when the non-metropolitan district was founded. Whilst both the drawing and the building are somewhat clumsy, this example illustrates two final remarks I would like to share.

Firstly, my original intention for this paper was to be able to survey the architectural output recorded in industry journals and to be able to evidence definitively that municipal design and construction was better and more innovative before April 1974. Though this single example, set against the classroom and hall, might lend itself to such a charge, it is by no means evidence and I have conducted no survey, as yet. It is much more productive to thumb pages than to search digitally and, despite the number of digitised journals, those that are more construction focussed, than design focussed, seem to have escaped the rush to scan.

Secondly, as is implied in the caption of the sketch, I found this building via eBay! Even knowing of it, the only record to be found in subject specific databases were two photos in the RIBA image collection, neither of which offered a date of construction. Here is one of the biggest difficulties in researching mainstream municipal architecture – much of it went unrecorded at its time of construction and, due to this obscurity, its revelation today relies on aficionados, interest groups and chance as much as it does on scholars.